

Sense of Displacement in Bharati Mukherjee's *The Tiger's Daughter*

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The last few decades have witnessed a remarkable change in the perspective of women in Indian English fiction. One of the reasons for this altered point of view has been the mass exodus of Indians to the West which posed before them narratives of broken identities and discarded languages amidst the basic difference between the culture of the West and the East. The expatriate writers or their writings have been able to transform the stereotypical sufferings of a woman to an aggressive or independent person trying to seek an identity of her own through her various relationships within the family and society. As a natural consequence their writings, reflect what we consider an expatriate sensibility generated due to cultural disparity and emotional disintegration. In this process it is the woman who suffers the most because of her multiple dislocations. She gets involved in an act of sustained self-removal from her native culture, balanced by a conscious resistance to total inclusion in the new host society. She carries the burden of cultural values of her native land with her to her new country, thus making it more difficult and problematic for her to adjust. She is caught between cultures and this feeling of in-betweenness or being juxtaposed poses before her the problem of trying to maintain a balance between her dual affiliations. Nevertheless, along with the trauma of displacement she is fired by the will to bound herself to a new community, to a new narrative of identity. As Chowdhury asserts, "For a critical evaluation of Bharati Mukherjee's female characters, one must understand that all her women characters are people on the periphery of all society in which they have chosen to spend their lives; they are all immigrants and new ones at that" (93). In this context we may review the novels of Bharati Mukherjee, whose writings are largely honed by her personal experience as a woman caught in-between, which itself has been described as a text in a kind of perennial immigration. As

her first novel *The Tiger's Daughter* (1972) is a story about a young girl named Tara who comes back to India after seven long years of being away, and on her returns finds only poverty and turmoil.

The novel moves on with the independent story of Tara Banerjee, the great-granddaughter of Harilal Banerjee and the daughter of the Bengal Tiger (named so for his temperament), the owner of famous Banerjee and Thomas (Tobacco) Co. Ltd. At a tender age of fifteen she is sent to America for higher studies. Homesick and scared, she tries to adjust to the demands of a different world. Her adjustment travails are described in detail, often using the flashback technique. Tara's early experiences in America— her sense of discrimination if her roommate did not share her mango chutney, her loneliness resulting in her vehemently taking out all her silk scarves and hanging them around to give the apartment a more Indian look, her attempt to stick to Indian ways by praying to Kali for strength so that she would not break down before the Americans— all portray the cultural resistance put forward by an innocent immigrant who refused to be completely sucked into the alien land. As Kumar says, "an immigrant away from home idealizes his home country and cherishes nostalgic memories of it and so does Tara in America" (31). Tara's habit of retaining her maiden surname after her marriage symbolically reflects her subconscious need to be rooted in her native land. Circumstances so contrive incidentally that she falls in love with an American, David Cartwright. Tara's marriage with David is reported in a summary manner, "Within fifteen minutes of her arrival at the Greyhound bus station there (at Madison), in her anxiety to find a cab, she almost knocked down a young man. She did not know then that she eventually would marry that young man" (Mukherjee 14). David Cartwright is wholly Western and she is always apprehensive of this fact. She could not communicate with him the finer nuances of her family background and life in Calcutta while he asked naïve questions about Indian customs and traditions. Her split self also raised doubt about her husband not understanding her country through her and in turn her concluding that he may not have understood her either. Thus she felt completely insecure in an alien atmosphere.

The new immigrant has to deal with people essentially different from him; he has to learn and understand alien ways, language; he has to face unaccustomed problems; in short he has to survive in a grossly foreign environment.
(Chowdhury 94)

After a gap of seven years she plans a trip to India. These intervening years though have changed her perception about her surrounding; she has not been able to override gender stereotypes and clings to past memories for sustenance. On her return to India her initial reaction is that of shock and disgust. At the airport she is received by her Bombay relatives and is introduced as the American auntie to the children and she responds to her relatives in a cold and dispassionate manner. When her relatives call her “Tultul” (nick name) it sounds strange to her Americanized ears (qtd. in Kumar 31). The railway station looks like a hospital with so many sick and deformed men sitting on the bundles and trunks. In the compartment she finds it difficult to travel with a Marwari and a Nepali. Now she considers America a dream land. When surrounded by her relatives and vendors at the Howrah railway station Tara feels uncomfortable. It is likely that she hates everyone and everything in India where she was born, brought up and taught many values, all because of her acculturation in America.

Mukherjee here shows that nostalgia and cultural memory are integral parts of an expatriate’s mental state but as one spends some years in the adopted country, the effectiveness of these things gradually wear out. One, then, finds it difficult to adjust to the ways of life and habits in the home country one has left years ago, particularly when the country goes through a serious socio-political crisis. Similarly Tara Banerjee Cartwright is in an intermediate stage when she is unable to negotiate the cultural terrain of Calcutta she has left behind seven years ago and is looking forward to overcome the loneliness she feels in the alien space and to be part of the nation. As “each atom of newness bombarded her” at Vassar, she longed for her usual life in Calcutta (Mukherjee 13). Her attempts to communicate with fellow students were largely futile. There was an invisible wall between Tara and the White students. As the narrative claims, her privileged Bengali upper class background and an effective training by the nuns at St. Blaise School in Calcutta helped her survive initial problems of cultural adjustments. She clung to the religious icons and old cultural habits which comforted her in small ways.

Later, socializing with fellow Indians through gatherings in Indian Students’ Association helped her to ward off loneliness to a certain extent. She kept contact with her parents, relatives and friends through correspondences, which at the initial stage was of great emotional help. Her visit to Calcutta is designed to highlight her expatriate sensibility and to

show the extent of psychological distance created as a result of physical separation from her home country and its culture. As the novel demonstrates, she no longer feels at ease with the Indian way of life, not even when she is in the midst of friends and relatives. This sets the stage ready for her eventual acceptance of the socio-cultural values of the new nation. As Rani says, "Assimilation and acceptance in the new culture appear impossible if the past is not forgotten" (83). Tara has no more an Indian identity and is always in clash with the culture of her native soil. The clash is deeply felt in the psyche of Tara who finds it difficult to adjust with her friends and relatives in India; and sometimes with the traditions of her own family.

Tara's psyche is always tragic as a result of the tension created in the mind between the two socio-cultural environments, between the feeling of rootlessness and nostalgia. She feels both trapped and abandoned at the same time. Neither can she take refuge in her old Indian self nor in her newly discovered American self. This difficulty of choosing lies in her refusal to totally condemn any one world. It might have been easier for Tara to leave her past untouched if she could find her old home contemptible, but she does not. She does not fit in any longer. The outcome of this confrontation is her split personality:

The heroine finds it difficult to relate, since her marriage to an American and her Western education brand her as an alienated woman. Since Tara is exposed to the West and has absorbed its values, she must be necessarily alienated and, therefore, even if she tries to voice her continued attachment for, and identity with India, the voice does not carry conviction because it is at variance with the usual stance of indifference and arrogance as these are associated with the Westernized Indian. (Tandon 32)

Tara's relatives attribute her arrogance to her American attitude to life and think that her seven years stay in America has transformed her thoroughly into a strutting peacock. But the fact of the matter was that she was not happy in America either:

New York, she thought now, had been exotic. Not because it had Laundromats and subways. But because there were policemen with dogs prowling the underground tunnels. Because girls like her, at least almost like her, were

being knifed in elevators in their own apartment buildings. New York was certainly extraordinary, and it had driven her to despair. (qtd. in Sunitha 264)

Tara's mind is constantly at conflict with the two personalities— one of an Indian and the other of an American. Caught in the gulf between these two contrasting worlds, Tara feels that she has forgotten many of her Hindu rituals of worshipping icons she had seen her mother performing since her childhood. She is convinced of her alienation when she forgets the next steps of the ritual after the sandalwood paste had been grounded "It was not a simple loss, Tara feared, this forgetting of prescribed actions; it was a little death, a hardening of the heart, a cracking of axis and centre" (Mukherjee 51). The phrase "cracking of axis and center" symbolically points out, "the psyche of Tara which has come in her due to the loss of her own cultural heritage" (qtd. in Sharma 69).

She even grows nervous and feels the changed attitude of her mother towards her:

Perhaps her mother sitting severely before God on a tiny rug, no longer loved her either. After all Tara had willfully abandoned her caste by marrying a foreigner. Perhaps her mother was offended that she, no longer a real Brahmin, was constantly in and out of this sacred room, dipping like a crow. (Mukherjee 50)

It is the American culture that has covered Tara like an invisible spirit or darkness. In the deepest core of her heart, Tara has an intense desire to behave like an ordinary Indian but her re-rooted self in America made such common rituals alien to her. She realises that she has become rootless now. She has become an outsider looking at her own life, from outside. She sees everything with an American eye and comments on everything from the point of view of an Americanized Indian. She finds herself marginalized on the psychological level and suffers from a split self:

Tara was literally, neither here nor there. She was a misfit with her Calcutta milieu and she was always under stress in America— trying to be correct, trying not to be a gauche immigrant, trying to be American. Tara is intelligent, highly educated and capable of self-analysis. She is conscious of her instability, insecurity and unhappiness. (Chowdhury 95)

The conclusion of this novel duplicates the confusion of Tara's character. The riotous and destructive mob outside Catelli-Continental hotel is merciless. Jittery, shivery and encased within a car surrounded by ruthless humanity, Tara feels the vulnerability of mortals. The turmoil outside is an external manifestation of Tara's inner state of mind and by leaving her amidst that turmoil, Mukherjee hints at the irreconcilability of such conflicts.

Tara feels herself, as misfit everywhere she goes. She is forced to look at her inner world consisting of two cultures and the two different ideologies which are two worlds apart. Realizing that the reconciliation is impossible, Tara feels to go back to David (qtd. in Sharma 70)

The novel ends with a chaotic scene and unable to present any transcendental vision. Tara's stasis of imagination and general inability to do any thing is also a reflection of the manner gender norms are internalized by girls. It is in India that Tara feels dislocated and displaced. In this way, Tara's journey to India proves as a quest for self and her immigrant psyche which proves frustrating, slowly leads her to illusion, alienation, depression and finally to tragic end.

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